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12.2 Public Health and Tobacco Use

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The three chapters on the epidemiology, prevention, treatment and management of tobacco use and dependence clearly show the enormous impact this problem has on modern societies. With an expected 1000 million premature deaths during this century (see Chapter 7), tobacco use is definitely one of the most important public health problems at this time. If tobacco were discovered now for the first time, no health administration would allow it to be introduced in national economies as a new drug. So, in fact, public health is constantly fighting the relics of the past.

From another perspective one could state that public-health and clinical professionals are trapped in a struggle with commercial companies who try to make a profit on a lethal drug. Public-health and clinical professionals have to solve the remaining problems that are left over after commercial companies have had their profits. The public-health sector is constantly repairing the damage resulting from lack of control of tobacco industries. The chapter on prevention clearly shows that tobacco industries are actively involved in trying to get young people to use tobacco because they *'would be out of business in 25 to 30 years because they will not have enough customers to stay in business'* (see Chapter 8).

Because the budgets that the commercial companies have for their marketing strategies are much larger than those assigned to public health, the struggle does not seem fair. As described in the chapter on epidemiology, the tobacco industries have developed very sophisticated methods of marketing and had the budgets to do so (see Chapter 7). The public-health sector with limited resources, a completely different set of methods, has not been very much of a match for these industries.

And although there are some successes of the public-health sector, the tobacco industries also have their successes. With strong political support, the past decades have seen a successful and considerable reduction of tobacco use in Western countries. As indicated in the chapter on epidemiology, however, tobacco production and consumption has more than doubled in developing countries over the same period. And while the prevalence of smoking amongst men has peaked in many countries, it continues to climb amongst women. These

trends make it clear that although the tobacco use can be successfully reduced, the efforts to realize this are huge and the outcome of this fight is still not clear.

On the other hand, the chapter on treatment and management of tobacco use shows that the methods to reduce tobacco use have been well developed in the past decades. All three chapters stress the need for a comprehensive, coordinated and global approach to treatment and management of tobacco problems. It has also become clear that single strategies may be effective on an individual level, but not enough to realize a substantial reduction of tobacco use and the associated disease burden. Apart from strong policy measures and international coordination, including a nonsmoking policy in public places and tax increases, it needs aggressive countermarketing campaigns, interventions on the level of the community, and individual interventions to support smoking cessation. There should be little doubt that such a comprehensive approach is the most successful strategy to reduce tobacco use.

This is an important message for public-health and clinical professionals anywhere in health care. Although many doctors and other health professionals only work with tobacco users on an individual level, they have to realize that their efforts to stimulate and help patients to quit smoking are only one small part of a comprehensive strategy stimulating the smoker to quit. From this perspective, it is very harmful when individual doctors who smoke themselves do not stimulate their patients to quit as well. The same is true the ideas supported by many professionals in mental-health care that the smoking of chronic psychiatric patients should be seen as self-medication or as 'even the last pleasures of life' left to these patients. To quit smoking is a message that should be supported by all people working in health care. It may be necessary to organize specific campaigns aimed at health professionals stimulating them to support the overall comprehensive approach of the tobacco epidemic.

There is no lifestyle with a larger impact on public health than tobacco use. Tobacco is a major threat to public health. Public-health and clinical professionals are learning better and better how to deal with this threat. A comprehensive, coordinated, global approach to treatment and management of tobacco problems is vital for the success in controlling the tobacco epidemic. Each individual professional should play his or her role in reducing this threat. The three chapters on epidemiology, prevention, treatment and management of tobacco use and dependence provide an excellent resource for public health and clinical professionals who want to get an overview of the current knowledge on this topic.

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